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Wings Out Your Window

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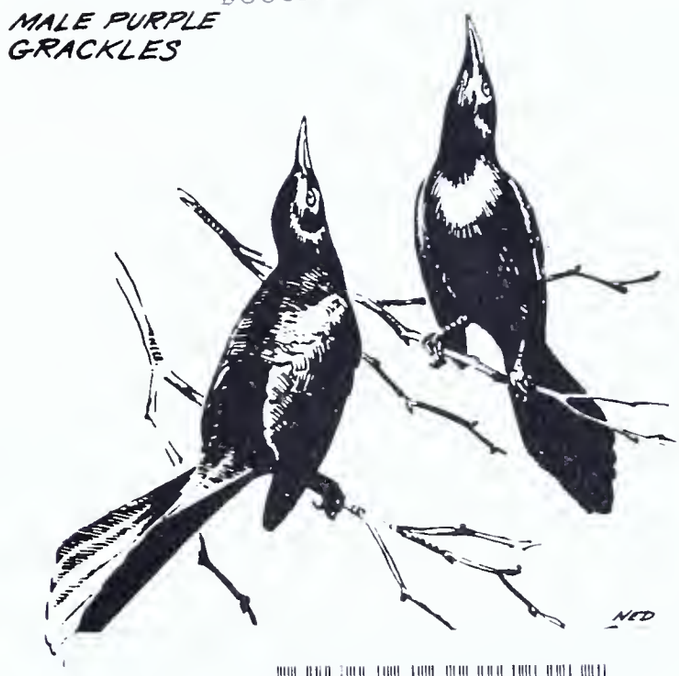
Bureau of Information and Education
Pennsylvania Game Commission



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Most of us have, at some time, gathered a handful of bread crumbs and thrown them onto the snow, hoping to lure a hungry sparrow into view. The excitement of feeding birds is shared by young and old alike. Birds are a form of urban wildlife which offers year-round enjoyment. There is something special about catching a glimpse of red as a cardinal flies by on his way to the feeder, and nothing announces the coming of spring like a vanguard of robins hopping across your yard, searching for worms. Birds are beautiful to watch and fascinating to listen to. Many people enjoy trying to mimic their songs.

But birds are more than decorative; they are useful neighbors. Swallows and purple martins have insectivorous habits. The insects they most commonly eat—beetles, winged ants, wasps, bees, flies, and moths—are found in your backyard. Purple martins prefer nesting boxes which are subdivided into apartments, from several room varieties on up to 200-room styles. A colony such as this will, through natural means, keep your lawn and garden fairly well cleared of insects.

With careful planning and planting, it is possible to convert any suburban backyard into a garden which is alive with birds all year long and which is acceptable in even the most manicured of neighborhoods. Shrubs, trees, vines, and other plants that serve the various needs of birds can also be pleasing to the human eye and bring beauty to the property. While you are providing places where birds can feed, sing, court, and nest, you are also landscaping your lawn and garden.

HABITAT ELEMENTS

Food

Food for birds is easy to furnish. Natural growth, such as berry bushes and fruit-bearing trees, can be supplemented with a variety of commercial products. However, the ideal management plan supplies as much food as possible through vegetation.

While food for birds, as for all life, is a basic essential, food provision is not the beginning and the end of birdlife management. Food must be accompanied by the two other habitat elements—water and cover—to enable wildlife to live in your backyard.

Water

The water needs of birdlife can be met with a birdbath or a garbage can lid filled with water. If possible, though, the most desirable way to provide water is with a small pool that encompasses an area large enough to support plants which grow in water as well as those which grow along its edge. The pool not only will be valuable to wildlife but also will provide an important focal point for your landscape design.

Cover

Cover—anything that protects a bird from predators and weather—serves as the bird's home base. The farther a bird must venture from cover, the more vulnerable it is to predators. Therefore, it is important to place food and water near cover. This job can, in fact, be made easy by planting cover which can also be used for food. Birds like variety, and by using imagination when planting, cover can be arranged to please the human eye as well as to be functional.

SUPPLYING THE ESSENTIALS

Providing Food

The goals when landscaping your bird garden are to supply natural as well as commercial foods and to provide the maximum number of homes for the maximum number of creatures. Choose plants which will give the greatest overlap in flowering and fruiting times. Certain evergreens such as cedars, spruces, and hemlocks provide food and serve as excellent year-round cover.

Birds live on a variety of plant life—berries, buds, fruits, and seeds. The more variety provided, the greater number of species you will attract. Manicured flower beds and neat borders offer little to interest the hungry bird. The more informal and "wild" your garden, the more hospitable your table is considered.

Food should be available, as needed, all year long. This, however, is unlikely if complete reliance is placed upon natural food sources. To be sure food is abundant during the winter, provide it in feeders. Fill them all winter and into the spring until natural growth has a chance to take over.

Aside from commercial bird feed, you can add several other items to the feeding station to vary the menu. Suet can be used in several ways for cold-weather feeding. Nail beef suet to a tree or place it in a mesh bag and hang. You can also melt it down and mix it with seeds, raisins, or nuts. Once mixed, spoon the suet into paper cups and spread it over pine cones. (Be sure to use unseasoned suet.) Chickadees, woodpeckers, thrushes, bluejays, and cardinals enjoy this delicacy.

Fruit is another favorite of various bird species. Sliced oranges, apples, and raisins are necessary to orioles that winter in cold climates. Even birds which do not normally visit feeding stations–robins, waxwings, thrushes, and bluebirds–are attracted by dried figs, currents, and raisins.

Titmice, Carolina wrens, chickadees, and nuthatches are fond of peanut butter. In fact, it is such a favorite that birds have been known to alight on human hands to eat it. Coarsen the peanut butter with cornmeal or bread crumbs to eliminate choking and hang it from a tree in empty orange halves.

Hummingbird nectar is a special dish which can easily be prepared during a spare evening or Sunday afternoon. Boil one part sugared-honey and three parts water to slow fermentation. Prepare the nectar in small batches and refrigerate unused portions at once. Place the mixture in a special feeder or hang it at an angle in a clean glass jar. Adding a touch of red food coloring helps attract hummingbirds within inches of the window. Change the solution every few days to prevent the development of a deadly fungus.

Having two or more feeders cuts down on competition among species. For example, chickadees and titmice will readily approach a window feeder, while larger birds, such as jays and cardinals, prefer to feed farther from human habitation. Wherever you place your feeders, do not become upset if the birds do not immediately take advantage of the food you are offering. Birds are cautious and to ensure survival, might hesitate several days before approaching the feeder.

While feeders are an easy way to entice birds into view,

they are not the only way. Birds often travel quite a distance before finding the materials needed to build their nests. And because these materials are rarely found in our backyards, human viewers usually don't see the gathering and incorporating of the nesting materials. However, it is not necessary for this interesting facet of bird-watching to go unobserved. If you provide various nesting materials in your yard, the birds will use these provisions and will have little need to search elsewhere.

House wrens make use of small sticks up to two inches in length. Soft mud in a flat pan, dead leaves, dried grass, straw, and small feathers attract swallows, robins, and wood thrushes. Baltimore orioles use soft string, three to five inches in length. Grey and white string are suggested, as bright colors are more conspicuous and might attract predators to the nests after the eggs are laid or the young hatched.

By placing these materials where the birds can find them, one more stage in the lives of these fascinating creatures can be viewed.

Providing Water

Although certain bird species live out their lives without drinking water, most songbirds would die within a few days without it. Birds do not sweat. They do, however, lose water through respiration and excretion. This loss must be made up through food and drink. If a birdbath is kept clean, birds not only will bathe in it, they also will drink from it.

The bath sould be kept in the sunshine and reasonably close to cover and safety. However, since birds get rather excited and preoccupied during bathing, cover should not be dense enough to afford the neighborhood cat a spot to wait in ambush.

Garden supply stores stock a variety of well-designed birdbaths. A wide, shallow bowl with a lip for perching is suggested. Cast stone baths in natural or rustic colors are often preferred. Whichever, type you choose, do not buy one with a lead lining, as poisoning can result.

Planting Cover

During periods of wet, cold, or windy weather, birds seek cover. Natural storm shelters include evergreen thickets, deciduous trees (when in leaf), cavities in tree trunks, areas under thick mats of over hanging grass, spaces under eaves, or crevices in stone walls. If thickets are cleared away and trees with nesting cavities cut down, birds are robbed of natural cover protection.

Thick cover provides protection from predators as well as from the elements. Thorned plants such as the hawthorn tree or the bushy pyracantha discourage predatory birds and cats, allowing the songbird a quick escape. Hedges of holly, juniper, and blackberry bushes also offer concealment.

Thickets and evergreen clusters offer more than temporary refuge; they also provide places where birds can rest. Birds are not always foraging for food and water. Most of their day is spent resting and preening in the branches of a tree. Those plants which offer protection from predators also provide shade and rest during the day's inactive periods.

When planting cover, blend several species, sizes, and shapes. You have any number of options to choose from: hardwoods and conifers; vines, shrubs, and trees; grasses, flowers, and even weeds. If your yard is small, it might be wise to use mostly single speciman plants. But if you have a large area to work with. hedges, clumps, and feeding strips can be used. In a wooded area, a small clearing will add variety to your landscape.

Birds need cover in which to produce and raise their young. Each reproductive area must offer protection from the elements and be relatively safe. It must be either inaccessible to or well hidden from predators.

A hedge, thicket, or strip of untouched brush provides good nesting opportunities for a large number of birds. Holly, privet, hawthorn, and multipflora rose hedge contain excellent building sites, offer shelter and concealment, and provide escape routes. The numerous forks in the branches of these hedges provide underpinning for the first nest twigs.

Careful pruning at various heights can turn an unpromising hedge into an inviting nesting site. Prune hedges during early spring or fall so that they remain undisturbed during the breeding season. Once a bird has chosen a nesting site, do not "improve" the situation, or it might desert.

CALENDAR OF ACTIVITY

January–February:

Feeder birds are dependent upon steady quantities of high-quality foods during this time. Since snow often covers the ground, your feeder will become the main source of food for many birds. Pine siskins, redpolls, and evening grosbeaks are unusual northern finches which might frequent your feeder. Near the end of this season, feeder birds might become restless. As the days get longer, the beginning of breeding season is in sight.

March–April:

Shifts in bird population take place at this time. The tufted titmouse and the downy woodpecker, permanent residents of the area, will stay through the season. New birds appear daily as they migrate north, especially the sparrows. This is the time when sparrow migration is in full swing. There is an increase in nest building during these spring months, and the provision of nesting materials will persuade more birds to nest in your vicinity.

May–June:

Warblers, vireos, flycatchers, orioles, and tanagers migrate North. Most of these insect-eating birds will not visit your feeder, but they will eat the caterpillars and insects in your yard. If trees and shrubbery are mature enough, some might stay to nest.

July–August:

Most birds are now busy raising young and feeding on the abundant natural foods available. Many berry-producing

plants are carrying heavy loads of fruit which attract birds. Commercial bird seeds can be used, but avoid suet, as it will turn rancid in the heat. Many bird watchers enjoy feeding hummingbirds in these summer months. These cocky little birds will come within inches of your window to feed from pans of sugar water.

September–October:

With the breeding season over, activity will increase at your feeder. Sparrows and woodpeckers become abundant, and insect-eating warblers and vireos will visit your yard on their return trip to the tropics. By providing feeder grains and suet, you might persuade birds that would normally go farther south to stop here for the winter. Set your pace for winter feeding at this time and continue it through spring. In this manner, you will avoid food shortages for the birds which depend on you.

November–December:

Myrtle warblers and yellow-shafted flickers are lingering migrants that might use your feeder. If there is heavy snow, sprinkle seed under the shrubbery and make sure the feeders are cleared and usuable. They are vital during a snowstorm. Save your used Christmas tree and collect others from neighbors. These make brushpiles which provide excellent shelter during the remaining winter months.

SPECIES	MATURE HEIGHT	FLOWERS	FRUITS	SUN/ SHADE	WET/DRY	WILDLIFE SERVED
Trees						
1. Beech	50-100′		Sept-Oct	Lt shd/sun	Moist	Nuts, seeds, acorns: fall and winter food for squirrels, large songbirds. Spring, summer foliage: cover and reproductive areas for songbirds, tree-dwelling mammals, insects. Leafless branches: winter roosting for birds.
2. Red Oak	50-100′		Sept-Oct	Lt shd/sun	Moist	
3. White Oak	40-100′		Sept-Nov	Lt shd/sun	Moist/dry	
4. Red Maple	40-100′			shd/sun	Moist/ well-drained	
5. White Pine	40-100′		Aug-Sept	Sun	Dry	Cones: fall, winter food for pine squirrels, songbirds. Boughs: year-round cover, reproductive areas for songbirds, tree-dwelling mammals, insects.
6. White Spruce	40-100′		Aug-Sept	Sun	Dry	
7. Hemlock	50-80′			Shd/sun	Moist	
8. Red Cedar	30-80′		Sept-May	Sun	Moist/dry	
Small Trees						
9. Winterberry	10′	May	Oct	Lt shd	Wet/moist	Flowers: food for butterflies, other insects. Berries, fruit: fall, winter food for songbirds. Spring, summer foliage: cover, reproductive areas for songbirds. Leafless branches: winter cover, roosting for songbirds.
10. Flowering dogwood	10-40′	Mar-June	Aug-Nov	Sun	Well-drained/ dry	
Shrubs						
11. Hawthorne	10-20′	June	Oct-Mar	Sun	Dry	
12. Crabapple	15-30′	Mar-May	Sept-Nov	Sun	Moist/dry	
13. Autumn olive	10′	May-July	Sept-Feb	Sun/lt shd	Moist/dry	
14. Silky dogwood	6-8′	May-July	Aug-Sept	Sun/lt shd	Wet to dry	
15. Red osier dogwood	to 10′	May-Aug	July-Oct	Sun	Moist/wet	
16. Elderberry	3-13′	June-July	Aug-Sept	Sun	Moist/wet	Spring, early summer flowers: food for butterflies, other insects. Berries: food for songbirds. Foliage: cover, reproductive areas for songbirds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects. Dead branches: winter cover for ground-dwelling mammals and birds.
17. Blackberry	to 10′	May-July	July-Sept	Sun	Moist	
18. Rhododendron	10-15′	May-July	Aug-Dec	Shd	Moist	Spring flowers: food for butterflies, other insects, hummingbirds. Foliage: dense cover, reproductive areas for songbirds, mammals. Rhododendron foliage: winter cover for songbirds, mammals.
19. Honeysuckle	to 10′	June-July	July-Sept	Sun/shd	Well-drained/ dry	
Annual Flowers						
20. Sunflowers	to 5′	Aug-Oct	Sept-Nov	Sun	Moist/dry	Flowers: food for butterflies, other insects. Seeds: late-summer, fall, winter food for many seed-eating birds, especially sparrows.
21. Asters	to 4′	Aug-Oct	Sept-Nov	Sun	Moist	
22. Daisies	to 2′	June-Aug	July-Sept	Sun	Dry	
23. Marigolds	to 2′	Aug-Oct	Sept-Nov	Sun	Moist/dry	
24. Black-eyed Susans	to 2′	June-Sept	July-Sept	Sun	Dry	

OUTSIDE READING

U.S. Department of Agriculture pamphlets that may be helpful are:

Soil Conservation at Home (AIB-244)
Making Land Produce Useful Wildlife (FB-2035)
More Wildlife Through Soil and Water Conservation (AIB-175)
Autumn Olive for Wildlife and Other Conservation Uses (L-458)
Growing the Flowering Dogwood (G-88)